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TAGS: PREL ARABL KPAL MEPN IZ GZ LE EG

SUBJECT: A/S WELCH'S MARCH 20 MEETING WITH ARAB LEAGUE
SECRETARY GENERAL AMRE MOUSSA

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CLASSIFIED BY DCM STUART JONES FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

Summary

¶1. (C) In a March 20 meeting with NEA Assistant Secretary Welch, Arab League Secretary General Amre Moussa discussed the upcoming Arab summit and Arab-Israeli peace issues. Welch pressed Moussa for ideas on how to help Israel and the Palestinians get back to the negotiating table. Welch urged Moussa to take advantage of the opportunity afforded by the Arab Summit to show leadership and, specifically, to improve upon the 2002 Beirut Arab Peace Initiative (API). While interested in improving both the content and "marketing" of the initiative, Moussa believed such steps unlikely absent meaningful Israeli moves to improve the atmosphere. Moussa suggested that an emergency AL session was being considered should present U.S. efforts to resuscitate the peace process fall short. On Iraq, Moussa emphasized the positive nature of the League's latest ministerial resolution on the topic, and cautioned the U.S. not to focus too heavily on security at the expense the political process. On Lebanon, Moussa committed to continued mediation efforts to end the current crisis, but warned that the situation was becoming more difficult and that time was running out to find acceptable compromises to the present impasse. End summary.

¶2. (U) A/S Welch was joined in the meeting by the Ambassador, Deputy Legal Advisor Jonathan Schwartz, NEA Senior Advisor Gamal Helal, and Embassy poloff (note-taker). Moussa was joined by AL Chief of Staff Hisham Youssef, Cabinet staff member Talal Elamine, and Spokesman Alaa Rushdy.

Israel/Palestine

¶3. (C) A/S Welch began by describing the near-term political calendar on Arab-Israeli peace issues, including several of his own visits to the region, and those of the Secretary to meet with Arab Quartet members and later with the International Quartet. This high degree of focus and engagement reflected President Bush's and the Secretary's deep commitment to resolving the region's conflicts. Welch asked Moussa to describe what the League hoped to accomplish during its March 28-29 summit in Riyadh, urging a more forward-leaning stance on the League's 2002 Beirut Arab Peace Initiative (API).

¶4. (C) Moussa touted the API as a fair starting point, and complained that Washington was pressing the Arabs to be more conciliatory, but was not pressing the Israelis. Meanwhile, Israel continued to send more and more "negative" messages such as its continued settlement expansions and separation barrier construction, its excavations at the Temple

Mount/al-Aqsa Mosque, and its rejection of contacts with the new Palestinian national unity government (NUG). Moussa asserted that a proactive Arab approach on the API was impossible without a "serious" and "fair" counter offer from the Israeli side (i.e., "a door for a door"). When the Israelis are ready, he said, the U.S. must serve as broker in the process. Moussa emphasized the importance of getting the sides back to the negotiating table and said he could accept meetings of an expanded Quartet "i.e., Quartet-plus" in lieu of an "international conference." Moussa noted that if the current round of U.S.-led multilateral diplomacy came up short, the League was already considering holding an emergency summit or ministerial session to address the Palestinian issue.

¶15. (C) Returning to the Arab peace initiative, Welch pressed Moussa hard to explain why the Arabs had been completely silent in public about their own initiative. He also sought an explanation why the Arabs had not yet sat down with the Israelis and directly addressed their questions on the initiative directly with them. Moussa replied that such interaction meant implicit recognition and normalization with Israel, despite failure by Israel to take positive steps in the direction of the Arabs' collective and "fair" position. "We won't sit together with them to socialize: if they have something to offer, we'll sit with them." The USG needed to assume the role of broker to get the peace process back on track. Welch and delegation also discussed the precise wording and political significance of PM Haniyeh's March 16 speech to announce the NUG's creation. Moussa's analysis was that the speech was a "major step" in the right direction by Haniyeh and Hamas, and something that should be welcomed and built upon.

Iraq

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¶16. (C) Moussa agreed with A/S Welch that "now is the time to achieve something concrete" in Iraq, saying Arab and U.S. interests are now aligned. He emphasized a March 3 AL Council of Ministers Iraq resolution as a "unanimous" agreement to support present plans to restore stability to the country and help the U.S. ("and us") to get out of the present mess there. A focus on security issues alone is insufficient, he argued. There must also be a focus on political issues. And, "we must hold the Maliki government accountable" for progress on the political front. While the situation in Iraq is a catastrophe, he said, "we are well disposed to cooperate" to help improve the situation there.

¶17. (C) Welch shared the USG impression that the March 10 Baghdad meeting of Iraq's neighbors went well and was conducted in a professional manner by the Iraqis. While it became clear at the meeting that the Syrians wanted to talk more with the U.S., the Iranians were afraid. The U.S. position on the regional meetings is flexible, and designed to support the Iraqi government.

Lebanon

¶18. (C) Moussa said that the political situation in Lebanon was becoming "more difficult." Recent talks between Nabih Berri and Saad Hariri appeared to have "not produced much." Lebanon, he said, would be discussed on the margins of the Arab summit, or behind closed doors, but no breakthroughs were expected. New issues, he said - "even more difficult to resolve than the tribunal or government formation" - will "creep up" and make the situation even worse. Moussa cited the upcoming selection of a replacement for President Lahoud as an example. We are trying to help, he asserted, though time is running out.

¶9. (C) Welch described U.S. thinking on Lebanon, emphasizing the importance of preventing Syria from gutting the international tribunal and further undermining Lebanese sovereignty. Washington will also support whatever resolution the Lebanese themselves agreed to on formation of a new Cabinet, consistent with Lebanese democracy.

¶10. (U) This cable has been cleared by A/S Welch.
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